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Lucyna Krawczyk-Żywko
Uniwersytet Warszawski

Looking Backward, Going Forward? “The Abominable Bride” and Fan F(r)iction

Abstract

The BBC's *Sherlock* is believed to have pleased even the most fervent Sherlock Holmes fans, yet “The Abominable Bride” episode caused a serious amount of friction within the series fandom. To escape numerous stereotypical trappings, the creators of the show offered a modernised setting, and thus not only did they transcend the Grand Game but also made the show an instant transcultural success. Deciding to place Sherlock in his “original” surroundings in the Christmas special, they fell into the trap of their own making, since their own text became one of the adapted ones. References to the Canon and its adaptations were the driving force throughout the three series, but the amount of auto-referentiality was a step backward as far as the viewers and “gamers” are concerned.

Keywords: fandom, Gatiss, Moffat, metafiction, reviews, self-referentiality, Sherlock Holmes

Having created and sustained a mass television audience for the series, Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss raised great expectations for the *Sherlock* Christmas episode. “The Abominable Bride” gathered 8.4 million viewers overnight, 11.6 million viewers across all channels over the festive season, and grossed over £21 million from special cinema screenings in 20 countries (Dally; “Sherlock” BBC; Sweney). Putting the viewing figures in perspective, broadcasters are usually pleased with around 7 million viewers over the serial’s broadcast (Butt 169), and *Sherlock*’s first appearance attracted 7.7 million viewers (Rixon 175). It was not only the prolonged break between series 3 and 4 that attracted such audiences to the special, but also its setting – the famous 1895 from the poem “221b”:

A yellow fog swirls past the window-pane
As night descends upon this fabled street:
A lonely hansom splashes through the rain,
The ghostly gas lamps fail at twenty feet.
Here, though the world explode, these two survive,
And it is always eighteen ninety-five. (Starrett)

The viewers, who instantly loved modernised Sherlock and John, were eager for their Victorian adventure, which was heralded using major traditional Holmesian signifiers: the pipe and the magnifying glass, the ulster and the deerstalker, hansom cabs

and London fog (BBC), but failed to anticipate its contents. Having seen it, some felt tricked or even betrayed by the showrunners (cf. McMahon), and the special episode polarised the fans (cf. Klimchynskaya, Polasek “Review,” Porter). This paper will discuss the negative reviews and reactions voiced by British and American Holmesians and mainstream press as they seem to stem not from mere discontent with the show itself but from the disgruntlement with its treatment of Holmes – the original, the Victorian, the Doylean. The *Sherlock* transmedia narrative had attracted even the most fervent fans of Conan Doyle’s literary creation not despite, but because of its ability to circumvent the rules of, or refusal to play, the Grand Game. Making an “authentic” Victorian setting a figment of the modernised detective’s imagination eroded part of the fanbase – those who might have been playing the Grand Game and who now seem to perceive the show no longer as a wink to the fans but as a mirror in which its creators admire themselves.

Transcending the Grand Game

A point of departure for those participating in the Grand Game is treating the great detective and his friend/sidekick as real people, the Canon as the account of their lives, and Conan Doyle as a mere literary agent whose greatest achievement was revealing the occupants of 221b Baker Street to readers. It usually manifests itself in playful pastiches, fan fiction, and pseudo-scholarship, but there is a somewhat negative aspect to it: the way some Gamers perceive adaptations – as “fictionalizations of historical events rather than a transfer of one fictional representation to another” (Polasek, “Winning” 44) – and the consequent commonplace complaints about fidelity issues. When it first appeared, the modernised BBC version managed to avoid such accusations since “it has written its own antecedent out of existence, [and] viewers are obliged to engage with *Sherlock* as though it were a primary text. This does not mean that viewers don’t recognize and appreciate that the series is an adaptation, but rather that it functions on a level equal to its source instead of as subordinate to it” (Polasek, “Winning” 46).

On the one hand, the initial appeal of the series was further strengthened by its apparent rejection of the stereotypical Holmesian signifiers, such as the deerstalker or the pipe, which “has led dedicated Sherlockians to argue that *Sherlock* ‘is in many ways truer to the spirit and heart of the original Canon than other recent adaptations’” (Polasek, “Winning” 47). On the other, the creators’ “heretical fidelity” (cf. Hills) to certain canonical trivia and their view that everything is canonical should have been read as a sign that the “iconic” visual elements or catch phrases would not be missing long. Since both Moffat and Gatiss are also fans of Arthur Conan Doyle’s work, the viewers of the series are expected and encouraged to be on the lookout for overt and covert references to both the Canon and previous adaptations. Scattered throughout the episodes set in a diegetically Doyle-free universe, these extra-diegetic gems are nods and winks to other fans of the creator of the great detective, and are a source of fun, even to Holmesian purists. Apparently, being faithful to the main canonical themes equals responding to the “presumed expectations and passions of Sherlockian cultures,” and as such, the series was compared by Gatiss to “a purist’s dream” (Hills

34). However, *Sherlock* has often been criticised for its abuse of certain canonical traits, e.g. the idea of male friendship which turned into an excessive queerbaiting, or for the treatment of women (cf. Fathallah, Greer, Primorac, Farghaly) but it is in response to the special that the critics sound most divided. Certain quirks, repetitions, and even self-referentiality may be witty, but only if the dosage is correct.

The Abominable Episode

“[A] full account of Ricoletti of the club foot, and his abominable wife” is one of the “pretty little problems” among the cases Sherlock Holmes describes as “done prematurely, before my biographer had come to glorify me,” whose records he keeps in a large tin box in his room (Doyle 529–530). It pre-dates 1881, the year in which the doctor and the detective met, but the Moffat/Gatiss duo decided to move it in time to Starrett’s almost mythical 1895, and make the most of its liminal canonical character.

Derrick Belanger’s slightly schizophrenic “Review of Two Minds” puts a fan’s perspective in a nutshell pretty aptly: speaking both as a Holmes Purist and *Sherlock* Fan, he praises and criticises, attacks and defends the special. His keyword for the show is “abominable,” the depiction of Mycroft is “just a poor special effect,” and the whole episode is “a travesty” (par. 3, emphasis original; par. 5, 9). On the other hand, he notes that the series itself is not about the mystery but the characters, one should not judge the special on what they expected it to be, and its conclusion could not have been better (par. 6, 4, 8). Belanger himself is an author of Holmesian pastiches and as such might be perceived as being more sympathetic towards the creators of the show, yet neither that, nor his devotion to Doyle’s creation have the upper hand. Generally, the (re)viewers compliment the actors on their performance and the creators on recreating period costume and setting. Even the playful presence of the stereotypical Holmesian signifiers is appreciated; they do not, however, agree on the script. While some see “an origami swan of surprises” (Hogan par. 7), others decry the “disjoined nature of the script” with “one mystery complicated by another mystery with multiple references” (Dymowski par. 6). Even the anger that flared up over the question of the episode’s supposed mansplaining of feminism (Silver) fades in the light of the annoyance at its treatment of Doyle’s Canon and *Sherlock*’s format.

The Victorian setting is replaced by the modern one, but the narrative is not Victorian, not even Doylean, it is Moffat-Gatissian through and through. Adaptations, in Linda Hutcheon’s words, are “inherently ‘palimpsestuous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts” (6); “The Abominable Bride” is additionally inherently metafictional and self-referential. Since 2010, the creators have been adapting not just Sherlock Holmes and his world, but also other adaptations and appropriations; what they did in the special is “making merry with *their* original source material; you get the sense they’ve been aching to do this for years” (Gosch par. 5, emphasis added), attaching one more layer to Roland Barthes’s “stereophony of echoes, citations, references” (qtd. in Hutcheon 6). Although our culture is fairly palimpsestuous and self-referential in itself, the second part of the episode seems to be bordering on a cacophony of self-references.

One of the main complaints made by (re)viewers is that canonical references were “lazy” and “played more for comedy than insight” (Myers par. 7; Dymowski par. 3). One of the reviewers openly states that the show made him “actively angry at how it wasted a great idea in the name of pointless complications and fan service” and became “a self-indulgent mess” (VanDerWerff par. 3). Another put it bluntly: “Under Steven Moffat, the great detective has become trapped in an endless hall of mirrors reflecting on his own cleverness,” and the episode is “an over-indulgent guitar solo, showing off talented strumming and fingering at the expense of the song. [...] so incessantly meta, so self-referential, that you couldn’t be distracted from the emptiness” (Myers subtitle; par. 5, 6). Evoking the “authentic” atmosphere, the creators seemingly critically address nineteenth-century stereotypes and challenge the then literary norms and conventions, especially those governing the lives of women: Mary Watson rebels at her role of a submissive wife, Molly Hooper follows her ambitions, Mrs Hudson refuses to be a mere plot device. All these might be perceived as an incorporation of the neo-Victorian critique of Victorian gender codes; however, being merely a part of Sherlock’s mind palace, these bigger-than-their-originals female characters are reduced to what may be read as an exercise in avoiding further post-Irene Adler criticism on the part of the creators. Apparently, “Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s females turn out to make better points and provide more truly feminist arguments despite having been written some little time ago than the BBC’s” (Faye par. 6). Moreover, whether we like it or not, it is those very Victorian gender, class, and race codes that allow the original Holmes to draw conclusions and solve cases (Rosemary Jann qtd. in Poore 161).

The scene most heavily criticised – not only by feminists – is the meeting of the suffragettes, during which Sherlock finally draws conclusions from the Ricoletti case, the same Mycroft has already made. Below Rupert Myers’s review, *The Telegraph* made available an online survey asking whether the scene was a good idea – on January 8, 2016, 62 per cent of 3814 voters believed it was not; on February 21, 2016, 61 per cent of 12 606 voters believed so, which clearly demonstrated that the paper’s readers were not amused. Amusement – or lack thereof – aside, it is worth paying more attention to what follows the detective’s monologue – it is Moriarty and his questions: “Is it silly enough for you yet? Gothic enough, mad enough?” (“The Abominable Bride”). Together with the concept of the mind palace, they have been used to defend the co-writers against feminist critique (cf. Silver) but, referring to the atmosphere of the abominable wife’s case, they may be read as an overt commentary on the Victorian part of the episode and, by extension, on certain (all too) great expectations that were raised about it. After all, the trailer did begin with Sherlock Holmes announcing not a Gothic mystery but a performance: “The stage is set, the curtain rises, we are ready to begin.” (BBC) Whether or not Moffat and Gatiss unmasked their attitude here is not that apparent; what matters is the focus on the artificiality of the Victorian/original setting, which leads to re-fictionalisation of the “authentic” 221b Baker Street universe and its inhabitants, something the Grand Game paradigm does not allow. Moreover, some (re)viewers seem to be in need of creating a mind palace of their own to pretend the episode has not happened (Myers par. 8).

A Tale of Two Fanboys

Moffat and Gatiss not only admit to being "avid fans of the original stories," but also claim to be "the ultimate fanboys" and "the two biggest Sherlock fanboys in the world" ("A Study in Sherlock"; "The Abominable Bride" extras; "Episode 86"). Being also authors, their relationship with the series' fandom is rather complicated. They should understand what other fans expect, especially since they themselves were involved in the *Doctor Who* fan-fiction before the show's TV comeback (Christopher Marlow qtd. in Poore 166). On the one hand, "there is no contract between authors and fans requiring the former to continue to entertain the latter"; on the other, no author wants to alienate fans, not only because "fandom is the most powerful marketing tool a work of fiction can have" (Schwabach 12, 13). Canon-literate Holmesians/Sherlockians are a part of what is called a "preconstructed and preselected audience" (Thomas Elsaesser qtd. in Hutcheon 128) and, as the analysis of the 2010 series press pack demonstrates, have been in the picture from the very beginning of *Sherlock* (Rixon 168). One other thing was also there from the very beginning – the status of the creators as auteurs, especially in the case of Steven Moffat: it is his Sherlock, "not the BBC's or even Benedict Cumberbatch's" (Rixon 172).

Fans have already "claimed and extended" this transmedia adaptation elsewhere online, and this process is happening to other projects in the event TV mould as well. Being a fan is often defined, or even measured, by how much new adaptive content one may add, and producers no longer control it – instead, they are expected to react to it and "accommodate" fans (Siobhan O'Flynn qtd. in Hutcheon 184–187, 192). Despite the seemingly close contact Moffat and Gatiss appear to have with *Sherlock* fans via social media, Lynn S. Zubernis and Katherine Larsen perceive their "onscreen acknowledgment of fandom [as] little more than lip service," with Moffat ridiculing "shows' ardent fans as nerdy and dismiss[ing] their criticism of his portrayals of women and sexuality, particularly the homoerotic subtext of the Sherlock/Watson relationship" (qtd. in Maloney par. 6; par. 10). Still, together with Gatiss, they have managed to create a transnational icon appealing to fans of Doyle's detective in almost every corner of the globe.

Doyle had to face fans of his creation as well. Had it not been for them, the great detective would probably not have survived the Reichenbach Fall, and the Westminster Council would not have decided to place the Sherlock Holmes Museum under the non-existent number "221b" of Baker Street (Cranfield 70). Benjamin Poore seems to be right predicting "we'll always have Reichenbach" in a Holmes's adaptation (169), since "a hero once risen from the grave has surely established that he is impervious to any new threat" (Thomas Leitch qtd. in Poore 161). *Sherlock* has offered it twice: in the last episode of season 2, and now in the Sidney Paget's manner in the special. In the latter, the detective assures both John and the audience that he "always survive[s] the fall" ("The Abominable Bride"); the former, or more precisely the viewers' reaction to it, is especially interesting as far as the fandom is concerned.

Unravelling the mystery of Sherlock's survival is something many fans were spending their time on, e.g. creating a Google Street Map to test their theories, which was reflected in the first episode of season 3 #sherlocklives support group and other nods to and

winks at the series fandom (Nussbaum par. 3); the rest of the season followed in its footsteps. The last episode teased the viewers with its ending, hinting at the prospect of Moriarty also surviving his death. Constructing the special episode around the idea of Sherlock's mind palace proved "being extremely convenient from a fan service perspective" (Cox par. 4) in terms of including even more "what-ifs" and possibilities to address fan fantasies than it was done in season 3. However, using the same stratagem as with the Mayfly Man case – the courtroom scene as a mind palace in "The Sign of Three," or Charles Augustus Magnussen, the detective's worthy opponent equipped with the same tool – a great storage space, his own mind palace, is repetitive. This is even more evident in the context of the fact that Sherlock has already met Moriarty in his mind palace while solving another "case" – Mary Morstan's, in the very few minutes after she shot him; it is worth noting here that both Mary in the mind palace scene and Moriarty in the suffragette scene are dressed alike – in a wedding dress and a veil ("His Last Vow"). Thus, the end result was described as "knotty, obtuse and strangely paced" (Cox par. 2) and compared to "a race to see how many episodes could be referenced" (McMahon par. 5) – the aforementioned cacophony, indeed:

The good Victorian stuff from which holiday specials are made is a means to an end – a coda to Moriarty's swan song and a way to stuff as much Sherlock Holmes memorabilia into one episode as Mofftissly possible. (Porter par. 9)

[...] several callbacks to past Sherlock episodes that feel incredibly obligatory, as if Gatiss and Moffatt were demonstrating the 'cleverness' of their script. (Dymowski par. 5) *Sherlock* is less a television show now than it is a collection of potentially GIFable moments [...] reminding viewers of how smart they are for watching it, while never leaving them room to think for themselves or figure anything out. (VanDerWerff par. 14, 18)

Focusing on personal relationships instead of material details is a characteristic of fanfiction, Holmesian included (Naidu 16), one which has been sparingly yet successfully applied in the first three seasons, but making detection almost exclusively about self-indulgence was seen as going a step too far. Mark Gatiss made a joke on the set that the special is called "The Adventure of Having Your Cake and Eating It!" (Mellor par. 1), something that is not possible in the real world. Steven Moffat called the special "a palate cleanser for the series" ("Episode 86"), but this metaphor does not work either – the episode is rather one more ingredient of the same dish. One more culinary simile forces itself relentlessly: Doyle's overdose of "*pâté de foie gras*, of which I once ate too much, so that the name of it gives me a sickly feeling to this day," which he used in an 1896 letter to describe him being tired of the famous detective (Murray 296). Hopefully, despite the early reactions to "The Abominable Bride," fans will not have a chance to know that feeling while watching season 4.

Changing the Game

Sue Vertue, the producer of *Sherlock*, admitted the team "are thrilled to be a hit in both 2016 and 1895" ("Sherlock" BBC par. 2). Whereas the viewing figures support

that, the reactions of the polarised fandom do not. Writing a long time before the special, Benjamin Poore commented on the period setting as a potential problem: “Set the stories in Victorian London and you have fans complaining of every perceived inaccuracy [...]. Set it in a version of the present, however, and Gatiss and Moffat are in the driving seat [...]. Hints and clues relating to the canon allow fans of *Sherlock* to play along at home, to guess likely denouements and series finales, but only Gatiss and Moffat have the correct answers” (164). They are the creators, the auteurs, the rule-makers in the “great game of fandom” (Hills 40). Transcending the Grand Game has won them the following consisting of old fans and new, those who know the Canon by heart and those who may associate the (in)famous “Elementary, my dear Watson” with the CBS TV series only. For Steven Moffat, “sticking to the canon is not a cage, it’s a stage,” and the team behind the series make it simply because they want to: “it is a passion project for everyone involved and that is why it’s still here” (“The Abominable Bride” extras; “Episode 86”). For the fandom, “[d]issecting, debating, sharing, and ultimately understanding Sherlock Holmes in a new way is a communal activity” and yes, the special provoked a lot of dialogue, also about storytelling (Porter par. 24), but ultimately, it split it instead of uniting.

In the opinion of many fans and (re)viewers, by making the Victorian episode just that, an episode with so much space and significance devoted not to the case, not even to the characters, or fans for that matter, but to themselves, the creators did not move forward. Would they be more successful had they paid more attention to looking back to the “proper” setting, the Canon, and even other adaptations instead of their own episodes? While the idea of the show’s universe being relocated is appealing, it is the intertwining of the “authentic” and modernised worlds that displeases those engaged in the Grand Game. Furthermore, some fans felt they were cheated and might have thought that the rules of the game of/with fandom are being changed when the game is still on. “The Abominable Bride” could have been a match point but became a breaking point instead.

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